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RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO 4417  
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RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 0451  
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SENSITIVE  
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SUBJECT: GOI, NGO ASSESSMENT OF JORDAN-ONLY RED SEA PROJECT

REF: STATE 78652

¶1. (SBU) Summary. The consensus among GOI officials and Israeli NGOs is that the Jordan Red Sea Development Project (JRSP) will not proceed independently of the Red Sea-Dead Sea Conveyance Project (RDS) due to funding and/or legal concerns. GOI interlocutors asserted that Israel has sufficient desalination facilities planned to provide all necessary water for the state at a lower cost than JRSP could deliver, but stressed that they were not opposed to the purchase of water from Jordan in principle. Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) differ regarding the building of any canal connecting the Red and Dead Seas; all eagerly await the results of the World Bank study, but some insist that alternative plans must be studied in parallel to RDS or JRSP. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Daniel Nevo, Director of Multilateral Peace Talks and Water Issues at the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), said that he does not believe JRSP is viable because Jordan will be unable to raise the necessary funding unless the plan is part of an international cooperative effort. He said that King Hussein wants Jordan to be independent of other nations for their water and that Israel supports this effort, but the environmental impact of this project is such that it must be done in coordination with neighboring officials, including those from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Palestinian Authority, and Israel. Nevo stressed that neither RDS nor JRSP is included in Israel's strategic plan for water production, and that the water from either project will likely be more expensive than the desalination projects currently in the pipeline. He said that Israel presently produces 140 MCM per year of desalinated water at two facilities; a third will come online next month to produce an additional 100 MCM annually, and two tenders have been issued for 100 MCM and 150 MCM facilities by 2013. Combined with expansion of current capacities, Nevo predicts that these five desalination plants will produce 505 MCM per year within four years. When pressed on whether GOI would be willing to purchase JRSP water, he said that they were not opposed to it in principle, but he could not envision a scenario in which it would be practical. He also reported that at the July 20 meeting with the World Bank and Jordanian officials, it was decided that the World Bank feasibility study would continue in parallel to any work carried out in development of the JRSP.

¶3. (SBU) Dr. Uri Shani, Head of the Israeli Water and Sewage Authority, confirmed that he would be willing to purchase

desalinated water for the Arava Valley from the JRSP (reftel), provided the project is well-designed, particularly in regard to environmental impact and the location of the desalination facility.

Echoing Nevo, he emphasized that he does not believe the JRSP will proceed independently of the collaborative RDS, and he stressed that the final decision on any potential water purchases would be made at the ministerial level.

¶4. (U) Gidon Bromberg, Israeli Director of Friends of the Earth Middle East (FOEME), said that he is concerned that government officials are only interested in a go/no-go study and not in exploring alternatives. (Note: FOEME is an NGO with a long history of work on Red Sea and Dead Sea concerns including completion of a USAID-funded study through the Middle East Regional Cooperation (MERC) Program. FOEME created the 'Coalition for the Dead Sea', which is comprised of other interested Israeli NGOs, including Israel Union for Environmental Defense (IUED), Zalul, and the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI). End Note.) Bromberg said that FOEME has an excellent relationship with the World Bank and its lobbying efforts have succeeded in incorporating sub-studies on alternatives to RDS into the terms of reference for the study. Bromberg agrees with the Israeli MFA assessment that desalinated water from RDS or JRSP is neither economically viable nor needed in Israel, and sees RDS as simply a project to increase cooperation among Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority. He further asserted that it would not be legal under international law for any bank to grant Jordan a loan for the JRSP without a full environmental assessment and agreement on the part of the stakeholders. FOEME advocates a thorough investigation of the feasibility of combined rehabilitation of the Jordan River with reducing the environmental impact of mineral extraction by industry on both sides of the Dead Sea as an alternative to RDS. Bromberg estimates that up to 750 MCM annually could be returned to the Dead Sea by this effort alone, enough to stabilize it near its current level.

¶5. (U) Prof. Alon Tal from the Jacob Blaustein Institutes for Desert Research of Ben Gurion University, a respected Israeli environmentalist and winner of the Ministry of Environmental Protection's Lifetime Achievement Award, acknowledged that the Israeli environmental community does not speak with one voice on this issue. He said that all environmental groups had a "healthy" suspicion of any big project that would rewrite the topography of the region, and all await the results of the World Bank study. However, he asserted that while the "extreme environmentalists" oppose RDS and JRSP, the "professional" environmental community is showing a willingness to assess the potential of a canal because the present situation for the Dead Sea is so untenable. He expressed some concerns about the JRSP, particularly what he called a lack of democratic tools in Jordan that would otherwise force decision makers to more seriously consider the environmental impact of such a project. He also pointed out that the professional environmental community in Jordan is a fraction of what it is in Israel. These two factors lead him to believe that the environment would fare better under the RDS than the JRSP, but that either could provide an acceptable outcome if the Dead Sea is saved.

¶6. (U) Hannah Schafer of Zalul, an environmentalist group that generally opposes a Red-Dead canal, said that the organization is concerned about protecting the coral reefs in Eilat and the unknown effect of brine from the Red Sea on the chemistry of the Dead Sea water. Zalul is also concerned about the future of the Arava Valley and the potential for devastation should water from the project flood the valley. Schafer said that Zalul supported the Save the Jordan River campaign as a better alternative, but also awaited the results of the World Bank study.

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